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# DOMESTIC SERVICE IN ENGLAND.

BY MISS EMILY FAITHFULL.

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THE relations existing between servants and their employers have been much discussed of late : we have been told that an antagonism is growing up which is "shaking the pillars of domestic peace" ; one writer inveighs against "the semi-feudal relations" and holds a spirited brief for the maid ; another declares that "good old-fashioned mistresses" have died out, while in certain quarters the problem is considered "as momentous as that of capital and labor, and as complicated as that of individualism and socialism."

In one of George Eliot's novels, the landlord whose customers appeal to him to settle an argument which has arisen in the bar parlor about a village ghost-tale, states his intention of "holding with both sides, as the truth lies between them." I confess that his attitude very much represents my own feeling when I hear of the faults and follies of servants and the grinding tyranny of the nineteenth-century mistress. There is an old proverb to the effect that "one story is very well till the other is told" ; and perhaps the whole grievance might be well summed up in the assertion that imperfect masters and mistresses cannot get perfect servants, and that servants are no more a failure than any other class laboring under disadvantages to which I shall more particularly allude before the end of my observations on this vexed question.

It may be true that domestic relations have not adjusted themselves at present to the modern spirit of human life, but there is no clear evidence that the servants of to-day are really inferior to those who waited on our ancestors in olden times ; and in spite of the oft-repeated tale that there are "no servants to be had," I have never yet met any one who ever sought one in vain. Although the class of people who never dreamt of having servants a hundred years ago require them now, still the supply is

equal to the demand ; and this, too, in spite of the system of emigration which takes hundreds of young English and Irish women to the colonies and America.

It is not within the purpose of this article to touch upon the difficulties which surround domestic service in the United States ; but I may, perhaps, be allowed to remark that I was much struck, while travelling there, with the independent bearing of "the help," especially in the far West, and also with the vast amount of work done in large houses by one or two women—mostly Irish—with only the assistance of the man who comes once a day to do "the chores." Similar establishments to these in England would demand from four to six servants ; but it must be admitted that social habits are more simple in America and labor-saving machines are far more abundant : lifts connect the kitchen with the dining-room in even ordinary houses, and the hot- and cold-water pipes which are connected with the washstands in the bedrooms considerably diminish the housemaids' duties, especially as there is an outlet for the water used as well.

In America "the hired girl" is apt to leave at a moment's notice if anything displeases her, but an English servant seldom packs up her boxes and places her mistress in this inconvenient position : she gives a month's notice if she finds her place does not suit her, and as she looks to her mistress for a character, she is generally anxious to make a good impression before leaving. On the other hand, a lady has no right to discharge a servant without due warning ; she is only justified in dismissing a servant "at a moment's notice" on the grounds of wilful disobedience to lawful orders, drunkenness, theft, habitual negligence or moral misconduct, abusive language, and incompetence or permanent incapacity from illness. In Scotland a six-months' engagement generally prevails—a system which is far less satisfactory to both the contracting parties if a mistake has been made by either of them.

No lady is legally bound to give a domestic servant a character, but it is an unwritten law that a mistress should fairly state all she knows in favor of the girl who is leaving her service : such communications are regarded as "privileged," but any evidence of malice would render the person guilty of it liable to an action at the suit of the servant, and "a false character" "knowingly given" can be punished by a penalty of £20 if the servant in whose

interest it has been made robs the mistress who in consequence of such a misrepresentation takes her into her employment.

The "I'm-as-good-as-you" sort of spirit is by no means the characteristic of the well-trained English servant: her own self-respect teaches her to accord the deference due to those she serves, and she takes a pride in the dainty cap and spotless white apron which are regarded in America as "badges of slavery," for they distinguish her from the type of servants employed in inferior houses where such adornments are unknown and are regarded by mistresses as useless "luxuries."

There is a wide gulf between the ordinary "slavey" and the well-disciplined servant, both as regards personality and treatment. The general servant may perhaps have a "good time" of it in the tradesman's household where she is literally treated as one of the family, and fancies her equality established by the fact that she addresses all the children by their Christian names, takes her place with the family at meals, and spends her Sunday "in" at ease in the one sitting-room in the establishment, in familiar intercourse with her employers. But the lodging-house "slavey" has no rest for the sole of her foot from one week's end to the other. Her mistress, a woman of the same class probably, often treats her with a want of consideration that no lady could possibly show: it is true that the woman works very hard herself, cooking the meals of the lodgers, who breakfast and dine at different hours, but she is, of course, fortified by the gains she is making; the poor drudge, however, is toiling from morning to night for a mere pittance of perhaps £10 to £12 a year, learning nothing that will ever fit her for a better situation, and with hard words, instead of thanks, for all her efforts to please every one.

I shall never forget the impression made on my own mind by an incident which occurred to me when I had rooms in a lodging-house in one of the most fashionable parts of London, while the house I had bought was being decorated for me. I went to my bedroom after being at the first performance of a play at the Lyceum, at which Mr. Irving had been required to make a speech, and, coming home very late and tired, hastily retired to rest by the dim light of a melancholy candle. While undressing I was startled by a sound which warned me that some one was in my room: on looking round I saw what at first seemed to me a bun-

dle of clothes hanging over a chair ; it turned out to be the poor "slavey," who, worn out with the day's fatigues, while putting the finishing touches to my bedroom had sat down and fallen sound asleep in the armchair. She must have been there for at least two hours ! Up at six o'clock in the morning, seldom able to go to bed in her miserable attic till after midnight, and only half-fed, this unfortunate girl may be regarded as a type of a class of servants in England who are really much to be pitied.

A girl whose "first place" is in a lodging-house, or who, as the hard-worked, underfed scrub in a small tradesman's large family, in which the care of the perpetual baby falls to her lot, as well as housework of all kinds, has no sinecure ; she seldom finds any one who tries to give her an idea of the intelligent, methodical way in which she should set about her duties, and is consequently disgusted with the vocation, anxious to abandon it for the freedom of the factory, and ready to advise all her companions to do the same. The miserable little drudge has been treated by the petty tyrants into whose hands she unfortunately fell as one who was to be used as their abject slave, without the least regard to her feelings or inclinations ; she has been made to rise early and go to bed late ; her food has been the leavings of the master's table ; her work dirty and disagreeable ; often she has been watched as if her honesty was suspected, and her liberty has been so curtailed that what should have been her home has been converted into a prison. How can we wonder that servant girls under these conditions are "slatternly, slothful, and impudent," or that such an experience should make them inclined to seek some other means of livelihood ?

Good general servants are much sought after by families living in substantial houses and in a fairly comfortable fashion. They command wages varying from £16 to £22 a year, and resemble "the crew of the captain's gig" in Mr. Gilbert's famous "Bab Ballad," inasmuch as they have to be cook, parlor-maid, and housemaid all in one. Some servants like these places, for, though they have more work to do, they have far more freedom than it is possible to allow in large establishments ; "the general" has no kitchen warfare, at any rate, and only her mistress to please ; she has no upper servant to obey, and no "tempers" or moments of jealousy to ruffle her serenity, and she often ends in taking a genuine pride in the house and a keen interest in the family,

sharing their triumphs and sorrows after her own honest, hearty fashion.

The servants employed by the wealthy middle families and "the upper ten thousand" are not badly paid, and they are certainly not badly treated. When domestic service in England is compared with the position of needlewomen, compositors, and telegraph and telephone operators, the showing is certainly in favor of the former in comfort; the parlor-maid is better lodged, better fed, and, although she may receive only £20 a year, it is really equivalent to £70: the money value of her improved position would far more than treble her wages if it were paid in coin. A competent "table-maid" now asks from £18 to £30 a year; a well-trained housemaid, from £16 to £25; cooks, from £20 to £60; footmen earn from £25 to £40, with suits of livery; butlers, from £50 to £80; in some houses where the butler has great responsibility, and no house-steward is kept, he receives more than £100 a year. The skilled man *chef*, of course, earns his hundreds, while the modest kitchen maid welcomes from £10 to £18. The wages of housekeepers vary from £30 to £50 in private families; the head nurse and the lady's maid receive from £20 to £35; and in certain quarters still higher salaries are given. Mrs. Crawshay's scheme for "lady helps" has not been at all generally adopted. I have always advocated the employment of a lady in the nursery: the advantage to the children in health, manners, and morals would be of immense gain to any household rich enough to afford it, and by such means we might help to stamp out the foolish notion that there is any social degradation in domestic service.

One of the trials of the English housekeeper who has a large retinue under her command is the servant who is always on the defensive respecting her individual rights and place. "I keep to my bargain; let other people keep to theirs," is her obstinate cry, and she refuses to lend a hand outside her "own work," no matter who may suffer. The most obliging and civil servants I have ever met with are those employed by royalty and in aristocratic houses. While the "little middle-class snob" treats her servants with curtness, the well-bred woman of rank accepts their services with courtesy and grace; although she knows she has a perfect right to command them, *noblesse oblige*, and she has the self-respect which naturally accords the respect due to dependents.

The late outcry against servants strikes me as somewhat unfair and uncalled for. The prize given by Messrs. Cassell in connection with *The Quiver*, about three years ago, proved that the 1,500 servants who competed for it had lived from ten to upwards of twenty years in the same family. My own sister has a nurse who has been in her household for forty years—ever since her eldest son was born; another friend has had the same housemaid for more than twenty-five years and a coachman for fifteen; and many others tell me of servants who have lived with them for periods extending from twelve to twenty years. While we sigh for the good old-fashioned servants who gave their employers “the heart service alone worth having,” we are apt to forget the changes which have taken place in social life, the results of which are stamped as deeply on the servants as on ourselves. If restless ambition and discontent prevail in the kitchen, we must not overlook the fact that they first invaded the drawing-room. Nor can we be blind to the influence exercised by the widespread love of change and dress, and our servants are keen enough to see when employers live beyond their means and “make a show,” for this generally brings about the petty screwings which press hardest on the household. But it may well be asked, “Who are the tyrants—the mistresses who desire to have reasonable rules carried out in their own houses, or the servants who want their own way in everything, and try to rule their mistresses in the bargain?”

The relation between mistress and maid would be undoubtedly improved if the former had a more practical knowledge of household duties. Many of “our daughters” marry young and in utter ignorance of the management of a house: if middle-class girls knew something about domestic economy, the pockets of struggling husbands would be spared and many a domestic breeze avoided. I am now alluding to the mistresses who “run their own households”: the aristocracy know but little of their servants—save their personal attendants—and complain still less.

The monotony and restrictions which surround the life of the ordinary servant have given rise to most of the objections which have been raised against the occupation. “To clean herself” after a hard day’s work and sit down to needlework, or to the more exciting recreation afforded by *The Family Herald*, is scarcely exhilarating enough for the modern servant, and the joy

of the alternate "Sunday out" and the occasional holiday is spoilt by the hour fixed for the enforced return. The parlor-maid hears her young ladies talking at the dinner table of the delightful play they have seen the night before, and she is naturally inspired with a wish to see it herself; but this is impossible if the door is to be barred at 10 o'clock, especially as she has to find her way home in an omnibus, for which she probably has to wait half an hour when the play is over. The truth is that mistresses, as a rule, have not yet accepted a condition to which men in command of others have long since bowed—that pleasure and personal liberty in moderation must be accorded when the day's work is done. Servants are mostly young women in the prime of life, with all the instincts of youth full upon them, and it is cruel to ignore their social needs. Their followers and visitors are not welcome to those in authority, and therefore less objection should be raised to their occasional efforts to obtain the companionship of their own class outside the house when their work is done.

I fear we must own to another fault in dealing with our servants: women scold and nag in a way which is unknown to men who are really fit to rule. They listen to the gossip of other servants, and almost lie in wait for the suspected delinquent. A wise master knows the value of sometimes shutting his eyes, and will certainly let a good employee have time to recover himself before he attempts any expostulation. The ordinary mistress unfortunately summons the servant before she has controlled her own temper, and the result is disastrous to both. If once "a hostile attitude" describes the relation between the drawing-room and the kitchen, a state of constant friction must ensue.

I do not ignore the trials experienced by the mistresses of untrained servants: too often a succession of wasteful, ignorant girls pass, like phantasmagoria, across the threshold, leaving, however, a very convincing proof of their reality in the wreck of kitchen utensils, china, and other household treasures. Where large establishments are kept, young servants are carefully taught their separate duties; but it is a deplorable fact that girls who have passed the fifth board-school standard are often incapable of lighting a fire, or of washing a wine-glass without breaking it. They can read the "penny dreadful," but they cannot darn their stockings or mend their clothes. The want of technical train-



ing is the disadvantage which has threatend to make servants a failure ; but our board schools are now waking up to their responsibilities; they have begun to include needlework and cooking in their list of subjects, and I hope they will shortly add laundry and house work.

Mrs. Darwin appears to think that the mistress who demands a formal character of the servant should be willing to furnish one respecting herself. She writes in *The Nineteenth Century* :

“Every mistress should choose a referee, or two referees, among her servants past or present, who have been with her not less than two years ; she should give the names and addresses of these two referees to the servant whom she is inclined to engage before she writes for her character from her last mistress. . . . I cannot imagine any reasonable objection to this plan. If carried largely into practice, it could become the test of any theory about domestic service. Mistresses could then gather statistics and make generalizations as to the situations which were most highly recommended and most sought after by the best and most competent of servants. It might also put spirit into the custom of character-giving, which is said by some to be so formal. Personally, I have never found it so. It puts a vast amount of irresponsible power into the hands of one fallible human being ; and though I think it may rarely be abused, it adds tremendously to the unnecessary and injurious dependence of servants.”

This novel idea has partially been indorsed by the Hon. Maud Stanley, whose work and experience certainly entitle her to speak with authority. I confess I cannot think the plan likely to promote the cordial relations we are all anxious to secure ; nor do I follow Mrs. Darwin in her argument that domestic service has necessarily a deteriorating effect on the character. The very nature of it makes it depend upon the individual character on both sides, and no arbitrary external rules will ever bring about a satisfactory improvement.

On the whole, I do not believe that there ever was a time when servants in England were better treated and better fed and allowed more liberty than at present : they might, perhaps, be better lodged, for English architects seem to have thought but little of the rooms servants would have to work and sleep in, and the condition of some of our handsomest city houses is not without reproach in this direction. Perhaps some day this may be remedied, when women's attention is turned to the interior arrangements of our houses. Miss Charlotte Robinson (Home Art Decorator to Her Majesty) is already helping us to make our

homes beautiful, and the aid of feminine domestic mechanical engineers who will help us to overcome the difficulties by which domestic machinery is still surrounded, and the feminine architect who will not sacrifice everything to the drawing-room and dining-room, will be most acceptable to all who wish to secure the health and comfort of the entire household. Some servants at present live below the ground and sleep under the slates, or have to be content with a turn-up bedstead among the black beetles and cockroaches which disport themselves in the pantry.

There is, however, but little wanton neglect of servants nowadays, nor do I think servants are less industrious or more incompetent than in the days of our "forebears." The infirmities of humanity and the spirit of the age are not likely to be confined to one section of society: all classes have been more or less seized by this restless craving for change and not unnatural wish to "better themselves." Good mistresses, as a rule, still manage to get good servants, who are not in a hurry to leave them; the English servant may consider herself well off compared to other wage-earning women, and, provided she does not squander her wages on dress, she is able, while living in comfort, to save sufficient money to provide either for marriage or old age.

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